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Excerpt from a radio talk by  
W. W. Vincent, chief, western district,  
Food and Drug Administration, U. S.  
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## HOW TO READ THE LABEL

### Olives

Two weeks ago, I talked about vegetable oils and I told you something about olive oil, of its use more than 3,000 years ago. Perhaps I should have talked about olives first. Accounts of the first cultivation of the olive are lost in antiquity, but certain facts tend to indicate the birthplace of the cultivated product at Syria. Very early, it became a symbol of peace and goodwill. Its propagation early spread throughout the Mediterranean countries and Pliny, the Roman naturalist, makes references to some 15 varieties cultivated in his time, the first Century, A.D. Today, we find the fruit growing in Mediterranean countries, in Cape Colony, the Southern-most part of Africa; in Chili, Mexico, and the United States, not to mention China and far Queensland, Australia. Olive culture in the United States can be said to be limited to California and Arizona.

Do you know that all the olives you receive are pickled olives? Pickling, as applied to food, means preserving the product either in brine or in vinegar. That statement will surprise some—especially those who never partook of a fresh olive. That extremely bitter principle found in all fresh olives is what we chemically term a glucoside—Ouropein is its name—and the pickling process accorded is primarily for the purpose of breaking down or destroying this bitter substance in order that the product may be made palatable.

The principal varieties in the approximate order of their importance for canning or pickling purposes are the Mission, the Manzanillo, Ascolano and the Sevillano. These four varieties probably represent 95% of olives packed. The Mission olive you will generally find so labeled because it is considered a superior olive. When ripe, it generally has a higher oil content than the other varieties named. The oil content is an index of maturity in olives. The minimum oil content of a ripe Mission olive very closely approximates 17%, while some will go as high as 25%. Generally speaking, the Mission is a small olive, the short diameter usually between 10/16 to 12/16 of an inch. Manzanillo, a variety introduced from Spain, is similar to the Mission in size. Its oil content averages about 2% less than the Mission. You generally find them labeled as to variety. The Ascolano and the Sevillano are larger olives, running from 3/4 inch to an inch across the short diameter. It is probably the Sevillano variety that you know as the Queen, or green-pickled olive, from Spain. These two latter varieties, as harvested for pickling, contain considerably less oil content than do the Mission and Manzanillo. Although of lesser food value by reason of the relatively lower oil content than the smaller olives mentioned, they generally command a higher price because of size and appearance.

Following are the commercial grades of California ripe olives as produced by the member firms of the California Olive Association. I state them in order of size, the largest olives take the names

1. "Collosal" - The average number of olives per pound is 40
2. "Jumbo"     "     "     "     "     "     "     "     "     50
3. "Giant"     -     "     "     "     "     "     "     "     "     60

It is in the three grades mentioned that you generally receive the Ascolano and Sevillano varieties. Those of less oil content.

Following comes the

4. "Mammoth"     - The average number of olives per pound is 70
5. "Extra Large" -     "     "     "     "     "     "     "     "     82
6. "Large"       -     "     "     "     "     "     "     "     "     98
7. "Medium"      "     "     "     "     "     "     "     "     113
8. "Seconds"     include all smaller than "Medium" grade.

(Evidently, the man who selected those grade names was addicted to the use of superlatives.)

All olives sold or labeled as ripe olives must be ripe before picking. According to the Federal Food and Drug Administration, that means, if of the Mission variety, they will contain no less than 17% of oil in the flesh, and the Manzanillo variety will contain no less than 15% of oil in the flesh. Should they contain less than these amounts of oil, the olives would be regarded as immature and not entitled to be labeled, "Ripe." To date, the Department of Agriculture has issued no maturity standard for the Ascolano and Sevillano varieties. Ripe olives are both black and brown in color and are considered of equal quality. They are usually segregated by the packer--- that is, they are graded to color. Olive packers consider the texture of their fruit very important and under leading brands you find no material percentage of processed olives that are considered soft. When you buy olives, read the label. Many packers picture on the label the average size of the olive within the can and, in addition, some tell you approximately how many olives are in the can. The net weight statement will represent the drained weight of olives within the can exclusive of brine. When packed in glass, it is frequent that the containers used are of such shape that, when filled to capacity, there is no material difference between the volume of the drained product and the liquid measure of the container. On this type of package, we consider it satisfactory if packers declare the net contents in terms of liquid measure of the drained olives.